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Patagonia's $1 Lawsuit Against an Activist Looks Petty. It's Complicated

The company says it's only interested in defending its brand.

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A woman wears a Patagonia jacket. (Photo by Robert Alexander/Getty Images)

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Last week, Patagonia filed a lawsuit against environmental activist and drag performer Pattie Gonia. Despite the lawsuit only asking for $1 in damages, the backlash has been swift. For a brand that built decades of affection with its moral clarity on environmental issues, suing an activist—particularly one whose work overlaps with climate advocacy—felt, to many, like punching down.

You could definitely make the argument that it's not a good look. Sure, it looks petty. It looks like a big brand is picking a fight with a much smaller foe. But that framing skips over what Patagonia says actually happened—and why the company argues it had no other option.

In a statement titled "Protecting Our Brand: Update on Trademark Activity," Patagonia was unusually direct about both its reluctance and its reasoning. "While we wish we didn't have to do this – and actively engaged with Pattie for several years to avoid this – it has become necessary to protect the brand we have spent the last 50 years building," the company wrote.

How we got here

The dispute is over the name "Pattie Gonia," a long-running drag persona deliberately styled as a pun on Patagonia. For years, that name lived primarily as a stage name. According to Patagonia, the problem started when things crossed into direct overlap with its own brand.

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Patagonia says it is "not against art, creative expression, or commentary about our brand." In fact, the company emphasized that it wants Pattie Gonia "to have a long and successful career and make progress on issues that matter." But that support, Patagonia argues, depends on boundaries that protect its intellectual property.

"For more than three years," the company said, it engaged "in open dialogue with Pattie Gonia to discuss ways she could continue her environmental and social advocacy, brand deals, and other work without infringing on our trademarks." Patagonia believed it had reached an agreement, and "for a while, it worked."

That changed in late 2024. Patagonia says Pattie Gonia began selling "Pattie Gonia"–branded apparel online and "continued to create and use versions of our logo." When Patagonia reached out to ask her to stick to the agreement, "our outreach … was refused." A follow-up message seeking to discuss next steps, the company says, "got no response."

The overlap

The conflict escalated in September 2025, when Pattie Gonia filed a federal trademark application seeking exclusive rights to use "Pattie Gonia" across clothing, apparel, environmental advocacy, online marketing, and endorsements. Those categories, Patagonia notes, "would directly overlap with the work we do and the products we provide – for which we have longstanding rights and trademark registrations."

On the one hand, this is pretty simple. Patagona is obligated to protect its trademark, or risk losing them altogether. Trademark law doesn't allow companies to enforce their rights selectively. Patagonia put it bluntly: "To maintain our own rights, we must prevent others from copying our brands and logos. If we do not, we risk losing the ability to defend our trademarks entirely." The company added, "we cannot selectively choose to enforce our rights based on whether we agree with a particular point of view."

Why it matters to Patagonia

That line matters. Courts don't care whether an infringer is sympathetic, progressive, or aligned with your mission. They care about whether you're actually defending your trademark. Patagonia even pointed out what's at stake if it fails to act: "Inconsistent enforcement might prevent us from stopping entities like the oil and gas lobby, counterfeiters, hate groups, or other bad actors from using the Patagonia name and logo." According to the company, those are "not hypothetical examples; they are real instances of past trademark infringements we successfully stopped only because we have been consistent in defending our rights."

Patagonia's position is actually very straightforward. The fact that the company is only suing for $1 shows that this isn't about money. It's about stopping a trademark registration and preserving the company's ability to control how its name is used in commerce and activism.

On the other hand, this is where things obviously get complicated.

Patagonia is a global brand with enormous cultural capital. Pattie Gonia is an activist drag queen whose work resonates with younger, progressive audiences—many of whom are also Patagonia customers. Even if the lawsuit is justified, the optics are brutal. This looks like a company exercising its power against someone operating in the same cultural and activist spaces Patagonia claims to support.

The minimum defense

By all accounts, Patagonia is doing the absolute minimum it has to in order to protect its brand. It's not asking for damages or for Pattie Gonia to be punished in any way. It's suing to make clear that it's more than willing to share its space, but it's not going to give it up by failing to protect what it has built over five decades. It also seems to have done the math and calculated the cost of pursuing legal action against a sympathetic and widely-known activist.

The broader lesson here is for other brands—especially those that trade on identity, trust, and shared values. Protecting your brand is not optional. Trademark law demands consistency, even when enforcement feels uncomfortable. But enforcement without explanation is a guaranteed way to alienate customers.

Patagonia has at least tried to explain its reasoning, stressing that Pattie Gonia's actions "pose long-term threats to Patagonia's brand and our activism." Whether that explanation is persuasive will depend on how well the company continues to communicate—not just in legal filings, but in tone, transparency, and restraint.

Sometimes the right decision still looks wrong. Sometimes the real challenge isn't choosing between building your brand and protecting it. It's proving that the latter doesn't undermine the former.

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